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book review

‘Here At The End of All Things’

Mediating Crisis in the Twenty-First Century

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Jeff Lewis, *Crisis in the Global Mediasphere: Desire, Displeasure and Cultural Transformation*
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In the final climactic moments of Peter Jackson’s blockbuster film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003), Frodo Baggins and his intrepid companion, Sam, slump exhausted against the barren, rocky cliffs of Mount Doom as lava is launched into the air around them. Having defeated the darkness that threatened to engulf their world, the protagonist comforts his friend as their surroundings literally crumble around them: ‘I’m glad to be with you Samwise Gamgee, here at the end of all things’. This moment might be seen to stand among many other moments, in various media, where crisis and culture intersect. There is an undeniable (perhaps fetishistic) fascination with the idea that all that is will one day be no more; that some catastrophe—human-made or ‘natural’ (though we can never truly conceive of it this way)—will wipe us, so the strange saying goes, ‘from the face of the Earth’. From the pervasive and ever-increasing interest in post-apocalyptic themes

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displayed in recent Hollywood cinema, to scholarly work such as Alvin Rosenfeld's critique of what he sees as the devastating effects of (popular) cultural representations on historical memory leading to 'the end of the Holocaust',[1] the presence of crisis resonates strongly in numerous arenas.

Jeff Lewis's exceptional study, *Crisis in the Global Mediasphere: Desire, Displeasure and Cultural Transformation*, engages broadly with the discourses constructing—and constructed through—the anxieties and desires that permeate contemporary society. Focusing on the (re)constructions of crisis and a (collective) crisis consciousness within a 'global mediasphere', Lewis touches on issues as diverse as the current financial turmoil, sexual desire and relationships, growing global inequalities, widespread ecological destruction, and continued warfare and terrorism. Lewis structures his study thematically according to these issues, examining how they impact on, and are impacted by, the inextricably linked human dispositions of pleasure and displeasure, desire and fear. Providing a timely analysis of cultural transformation and crisis, Lewis explores the implications for human society and human nature of a media culture that has become 'an open-bordered space in which text producers and consumers become exchangeable identities within a vaporous and contingent interaction of human imagining'. (2) While this characterisation of media culture could perhaps be qualified as more pertinent to some areas of the 'mediasphere' than others, Lewis nevertheless sheds much light on 'those areas of crisis that have become mainstays of the modern corporate media and broader zones of public discussion'. (13)

Rightly taking care to note that the phenomenon of culturally mediated crises and insecurity(s) is by no means new, Lewis argues that this is nonetheless exacerbated through the hyper-mediated, digitally saturated present: 'knowledge systems and their respective concordia of meanings are themselves shaped and amplified through a media-dominated culture—a mediasphere which articulates human consciousness and the ways in which the world appears to us as "real"'. (2) The widespread perception of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11 as something 'surreal' is one case in point among many. Taking a broad approach to examining contemporary media culture, Lewis points out that the intensity with which narratives of crisis maintain their hold on the collective consciousness has grown even stronger in the context(s) of the

millennium bug, climate change, bird and Swine flu, the global financial crisis, a looming worldwide food crisis, and the general unpredictability of a post-9/11 world.

In the book's introduction and initial chapter, Lewis maps out the historical precedents of, and pre-requisites for, the 'contemporary crisis consciousness'. In an important contribution to the already substantial literature on the theme of globalisation Lewis provides the fuller socio-historical and cultural context that is often overshadowed by the frequent prioritisation of recent new media technological innovation. Revealing the links between human experiences and endeavours across four categories of globalising forces, Lewis details the early migratory patterns of hunter–gatherer communities; the formation of 'agricultural civilizations and empires'; the modernisation of economy, industry and military through the Industrial Revolution; and the rise of the 'mediasphere' through a process of 'advanced mediational globalization ... constituted around the trade and exchange of images, information, finance and representational texts'. (11–12)

Distancing himself from the writings of Ulrich Beck and others, Lewis seeks to work towards 'a more definitive understanding of crisis'. (36) A particular strength of the book is his acknowledgement of, and response to, the Western-centric bias to be found in much of the existing scholarship:

> a problem I have found with many studies of human cultural transformation is their tendency to focus almost exclusively on European or western civilization and the sense in which history is the narrative of social progress. This imagining of cultural evolution and social progress sets the present in a privileged hierarchical relationship with the past—that is, from a perspective that is entirely embedded in the idea that the present is the apex of all history. More broadly, this version of history grounds itself in a modernist and largely European-western imagining of global conditions and cultural values. (9)

While this is certainly a valid point, and Lewis's broad definition of globalisation as a 'general process of human mobility and cultural transformation' is appropriate to his study, it might still have benefited the reader (particularly a reader from outside the media and communications discipline) to be exposed to a more detailed engagement with how the present research intersects with what has already been

written on the multifaceted nature of global flows over time and space. Nonetheless, Lewis's emphasis on the influence of the distant past provides a valuable perspective on the forever-changing cultural transformation(s) of the present.

The impressive textual analysis, combined with social and political commentary, traces the various narrative tropes from ancient mythology to present cultural reiterations and renegotiations of crisis in human affairs. A fascinating and lively discussion of New Capitalism and financial crisis moves from intertextual renderings of the 'swallowing monster' in African Bantu mythology and Old English poetry (Beowulf) to modern day cinema (*Jaws* and *Megalodon*) to the conceptualisation of Wall Street moguls by anti-globalisationists as monsters exhibiting an 'unrestrained pursuit of profit, free markets and growth at all costs'. (84) Lewis persuasively argues that 'the GFC that struck America and other parts of the developed world from around 2007 was delivered through a remarkably familiar discourse of doom—another iteration of "the end of the world" scenario'. (70) Similarly, Lewis draws on Classical Greek literature to lead into a wide-ranging discussion of sexuality(s) and, in a later (and perhaps the strongest and most disconcerting) chapter, a sophisticated meditation on the cultural conceptions of ecology—'the most formidable zone of the current crisis consciousness'. [170] Also of particular noteworthiness is the intriguing analysis of the mediation and memorialisation of the Bali Bombings alongside that of the September 11 attacks. Throughout these substantive chapters, lucid, critical reflections on gender, ethnicity and other pertinent issues are engaged with where relevant, ensuring a well-rounded, multifaceted discussion.

A significant—perhaps inevitable—issue with a book of this kind is whether or not the impressive scope of the study comes at the expense of depth. Well structured, clearly written and highly readable, there are nonetheless several points made throughout the book that would have been enhanced by the use of more detailed case studies. Those examples given to illustrate broad trends are often mentioned only fleetingly before moving on. For instance, Roland Emmerich's film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) is briefly cited as exemplary of 'the force of apocalypse and notions of an end to humanity [that] reach beyond international conflict'. (5) Casting aside my own feeling that the apocalyptic discourse of this film lay as much—if not more—in the marketing of it than the (rather restricted and

sedentary) storyline of a 'city under siege', more could be said about this text in relation to the study's overall argumentative thrust. Rather than the 'disaster movie' genre (and, by extension, the burgeoning spate of 'superhero' films) merely demonstrating Hollywood's preoccupation with the (apparent) 'end of times', such films invariably pivot on a redemptive aesthetic that give the (surviving of the) Apocalypse a distinctly Americanised and transcendent guise—revealing a complex ideological nexus of fears and desires that deserve further reflection. A more nuanced discussion of the ideological limitations of such films as *The Day After Tomorrow* (also cited in a later section on the mediation of global warming and extreme weather events (185)) would have enhanced the discussion. On the other hand, the evident limitations of a broad-brush stroke approach do not surface often, and readers familiar with the expansive compilation of films, novels and other cultural texts that are drawn on throughout will appreciate the breadth and relevance of the research and insights.

Early in his study, Lewis writes that 'through all of these apocalyptic renderings and their representation in various narrative forms, there exists a profound sense of anxiety, a crisis consciousness that seems to exceed the conditions by which our cultural order and pleasures are formed'. (7). Emblematic of the ways in which he explores the complex intersections of past and present cultural discourses around these issues, Lewis sets a foreboding passage quoted from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* alongside a dire warning by Dr Megan Clark of CSIRO about impending global food shortages as epigraphs to one chapter, (14) positioning the primal dispositions, fear and desire, as precariously balanced in these most unpredictable of times. Lewis's elucidation of this anxiety, permeating present day society on multiple levels, provides a highly valuable contribution to the study of contemporary cultural transformation. The crucial significance and relevance of the research can best be found in Lewis's own words:

> the crises that humans themselves have generated in relation to their phenomenal world has not only created deep pain for themselves, it is also responsible for the suffering of innumerable other species and the planetary life system as a whole. (221)

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[1] Alvin Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2011.